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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000195

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FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/19/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [MY](#)

SUBJECT: MORE UMNO CHALLENGES TO ABDULLAH'S AUTHORITY

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 193 - NEW CABINET

[1](#)B. KUALA LUMPUR 184 - POST-ELECTION SCENE

[1](#)C. KUALA LUMPUR 178 - ELECTION AFTERMATH

[1](#)D. KUALA LUMPUR 160 - ELECTION SHOCK

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) More challenges to Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's authority within his United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party emerged in the wake of Abdullah's March 18 cabinet announcement. The powerful Youth wing, led by an ally of Deputy Prime Minister Najib, contradicted Abdullah's instruction and decided to take no action against Mukhriz Mahathir for calling for the Prime Minister's resignation. After being ejected from the Cabinet, "Iron Lady" Rafidah Aziz vowed to stay on as head of UMNO's influential Women's wing and voiced frustration with Abdullah. A Women's wing protest forced the Prime Minister to bring in the wing's deputy as a special advisor in the Cabinet. UMNO Secretary General Radzi resigned with some bitterness from his party position, having failed to regain a Cabinet post, and Abdullah immediately replaced him for yet unclear reasons with Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, a Mahathir crony aligned to DPM Najib. Meanwhile, veteran UMNO leader Tengku Razaleigh's call for an extraordinary UMNO meeting in May, a seeming vehicle to remove Abdullah prior to the UMNO party elections, has failed to gain traction. End Summary.

UMNO Youth Takes No Action Against Mukhriz

[1](#)2. (SBU) Following a March 18 meeting, leaders of the powerful UMNO Youth wing announced that they would take no action against Mukhriz Mahathir, the son of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, for Mukhriz's March 12 letter asking PM Abdullah to resign (ref B). When the letter became public, Abdullah stated that he had tasked UMNO Youth to take appropriate action against Mukhriz, who is a Youth wing executive. Rather than supporting Abdullah, however, the UMNO Youth Executive Committee (exco), decided to take no action at all. UMNO Youth chief Hishamuddin Hussein, who is also Education Minister and ally of DPM Najib, told the press that the letter was damaging because it was made public. The letter represented Mukhriz's personal view, however, and therefore was not a subject for UMNO Youth response. "There are so many other more important issues faced by UMNO Youth. The main challenge is now the opposition, not Mukhriz," Hishamuddin explained. Mukhriz later reaffirmed that he

stood behind his letter's content.

#### Women's Wing Forces Last-Minute Cabinet Addition

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13. (SBU) The influential UMNO Women's wing (UMNO Wanita) held an emergency meeting on March 18 after its members learned that Abdullah's new cabinet line-up had excluded both the UMNO Wanita chief, former International Trade and Industry Minister Rafidah Aziz, and her deputy, Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the former Women's Minister. Shahrizat and Johor state Wanita chief Halimah Sadique chaired the emergency meeting without the presence of Rafidah. The group complained that UMNO Wanita was unrepresented in the cabinet, with only UMNO's Azalina Othman Said in a ministerial position. Azalina is not a Wanita executive but is a rival to Shahrizat as future Women's wing leader. Following the emergency meeting and a subsequent protest in front of the PM's offices, the PM's Department released a press statement announcing Shahrizat as Special Advisor to the Prime Minister for Women and Social Development Affairs with ministerial rank (ref A). Local sources opined that the PM could not ignore the pleas of UMNO's Women's wing as more than 52 percent of the party's members are women, who also represent UMNO's most loyal voting base.

#### Hell Has No Fury Like Rafidah Scorned

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14. (SBU) Despite being left out of the cabinet, UMNO veteran Rafidah Aziz, known as the "Iron Lady," decided defiantly to stay on as Wanita chief. In yet another UMNO press conference held on March 19, Rafidah admitted that she was shocked to be dropped from the Cabinet and wished Abdullah had advised her before his press announcement on March 18

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(ref A). Nevertheless, "I will not resign, I will continue to head the Wanita (wing)," she told reporters. She alluded to the possibility that Wanita members lodge protests with the Prime Minister over the exclusion from the Cabinet of top Wanita leaders, and she revealed she had sent a lengthy letter to Abdullah regarding BN's poor performance at the polls.

#### Jilted UMNO Secretary General Resigns

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15. (C) Former Home Affairs minister and UMNO Secretary General Radzi Sheikh Ahmad abruptly resigned his party and BN leadership position on March 19, just one day after PM Abdullah failed to reappoint him as a cabinet minister. Wearing his emotions on his sleeve, Radzi explained to a hastily called press conference: "When you are not made a minister, you cannot work effectively as a secretary-general for UMNO." Radzi and Abdullah recently had been at odds over candidate nominations and party leadership appointments in Radzi's home state of Perlis, a situation in which the Malay ruler went against Abdullah's choice for Chief Minister (ref B). When Radzi also sided with Abdullah's opponents, it was clear the former allies had split, and it came as no surprise that Radzi was pushed aside. According to local press, Prime Minister Abdullah immediately appointed former Tourism Minister Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor as the new UMNO Secretary General. (Comment: Tengku Adnan is known as a Mahathir crony and someone more aligned to DPM Najib. The rationale for Abdullah's appointment of Tengku Adnan is not immediately apparent. End Comment.)

#### No Traction Yet for Emergency UMNO Meeting

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16. (C) UMNO veteran and strongman Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah on March 12 sent a letter to all UMNO division heads calling for the party to hold an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) on the May 11, the party's birthday, "to address UMNO's

weaknesses." The ex-Finance Minister, who was Abdullah's only challenger in the 2004 party elections, lamented that unless UMNO realized the reasons for the electoral set-back, following the next general election "BN and UMNO will not govern the country again." The EGM was widely interpreted as a mechanism to seek Prime Minister Abdullah's removal, although Razaleigh was not so explicit. Razaleigh's letter followed his initial comments in the wake of the March 8 election set-back which also implied Abdullah should go.

¶7. (C) Notwithstanding Razaleigh's impassioned plea, the call for an EGM apparently fell on deaf ears among most UMNO division chiefs, and Prime Minister Abdullah quickly stated that UMNO would not hold an EGM. Even the UMNO Liaison Committee from Razaleigh's home state of Kelantan refused to endorse his call. Party leaders appeared unwilling to back Razaleigh's idea, either because they were content to wait until UMNO's annual meeting/elections later this year or did not want to identify themselves with anti-Abdullah maneuvering and, possibly, Razaleigh's own designs on the UMNO leadership position.

¶8. (SBU) Note: The UMNO Supreme Council in September 2006 postponed the scheduled September 2007 party election until after the general election. Although, the party has until March 2009 to hold its elections, local observers expect the UMNO Supreme Council to hold party elections prior to or concurrent with this year's annual general meeting. The entire multi-tier election process requires roughly three months from the time the UMNO Supreme Council determines the date of the next party election.

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